

# Overview and Scrutiny

## Afghan refugee response

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021

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# The crisis...

- Rapid fall of Kabul precipitated evacuation of 1,000s of Afghan, UK and other nationals within space of two weeks
- Council informed late on Monday 23 August that up to 600 Afghan evacuees would be arriving at InterContinental Hotel the next day for quarantine
- Council informed all these evacuees part of Afghan Relocations and Assistance scheme (ARAP), and all their immediate needs would be met, private contractor Mabway would be on hand with interpreters



# The background ...

- InterContinental Hotel running as managed quarantine service (MQS) hotel since May 2021, commissioned by DHSC
- At least weekly multi-agency Safety Advisory Group (SAG) meetings
- Robust health pathways and primary care support in place
- Strong and positive relationships between Council, hotel, DHSC, NHS and Police which effectively addressed difficult issues (unaccompanied minors, mental health needs, high risk pregnant guests, absconders)



# The immediate response ...

- NHS staff co-ordinated health triage as 100s (at least 100 children) arrived overnight 24/25 August, mostly after two days in transit
- NHS and Council staff attended hotel from 25 August, immediately identified people arriving had very little
- Initial call out to Councillors, local church, and NHS and HAS staff to volunteer at the hotel
- Council GOLD convened, emergency clothing donated by Greenwich and Bexley Hospice, staff and volunteers started sorting this and purchasing necessities
- In total, over 800 refugees went through the hotel, all but a handful moved on to bridging hotels by 14 September

# The Afghan relocation and assistance policy (ARAP)...

The ARAP scheme was set up to relocate locally employed staff (LES) from Afghanistan, offers unlimited leave to remain for LES and immediate families, free of charge, with extensive resettlement package of support

Not all the evacuees were under the ARAP scheme, and regardless, the promised Home Office support never materialised

*Primary Care colleague “has updated you to confirm that the arrivals at the InterContinental are under the ARAP scheme, so we won't need to provide interpreters and translators, as Home Office provides a package of needs assessment and support.”*

Email to Greenwich Interpreting Service, 09.30 on 24th September, based on contact with DHSC

# The scale of the challenge ...

- Daily meetings of MQS SAG stood up and liaison with DHSC
- Confirmation from DHSC that all needs would be met by hotel and Mabway
- Rapidly clear that hotel did not have staff to get people what they needed
- Rapidly clear that Mabway were nowhere
- More evacuees arriving
- Significant health issues and trauma being identified

← Tweet



Dan Thorpe ✓  
@DanLThorpe

Big thanks to [@BBCNews](#) for highlighting the work we're doing to support refugees placed in [@Royal\\_Greenwich](#) by [@ukhomeoffice](#) but without a system to support them. It's vital that councils like [#greenwich](#) are listened to & supported now. [@dscottmcdonald](#) [@LGA\\_Labour](#) [@SteveReedMP](#)



# The DHSC and Home Office response ...

- As lack of capacity on the ground from DHSC and complete absence of Home Office became clear, DHSC confirmed that Council should purchase what was needed and claim it back
- On 27 August Council put out a call to Council staff for clothes, amazing response
- Council Silver structure activated, rotas for sorting donations at Woolwich Centre and volunteers to distribute at hotel established
- Still no sign of Mabway, still no interpreters, still no liaison link with Home Office



Home Office



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care



Ministry  
of Defence

# Council stepping up ...

- Council escalated its response, and escalated its attempts to get Home Office focus
- Purchased new underwear and overwear in sufficient quantities for everyone initially to have a change of clothes, then more, and toiletries, sanitary towels
- Council interpreters secured initially for health clinics, then to support volunteers
- Volunteer interpreters initially organised by Councillors, but relied on G4S informal interpreters to identify needs from guests in rooms
- CCG offices provided space to sort donations



# Council and partners stepping up ...



Greenwich Islamic Centre provided prayer mats for everyone and copies of the Quran, Christ Church sorted donations and provided volunteers at the hotel

# Infection control...

- Throughout the life of the quarantine hotel, support provided by Council on infection control
- Review of staff testing facilities, advice on quarantine exemptions, advice on managing positive cases in workforce
- Lobbied for Afghan refugees to be free of quarantine rules once quarantine completed, but not agreed by DHSC
- Covid vaccination arranged by NHS with support of Council for Afghan refugees (155 people vaccinated at the hotel)



# Safeguarding children ...

- Moses baskets were sourced and purchased for all 11 babies under 6 months
- DHSC sent easy read leaflet on safe sleeping for translation and distribution
- Purchased emergency baby milk (when hotel ran out) and cold water sterilising kits
- Maternity clinics with interpreters robust pathway with QEH, two babies born during quarantine



# Safeguarding challenges ...

- Accepted immediate responsibility for three unaccompanied minors (and long term responsibility for one), had to escalate to Secretary of State
- Children's social worker went into quarantine to support the unaccompanied minors
- Young woman we are supporting is settling in well



# Volunteer effort ...

- Council and NHS staff volunteers supported by Council “silver” officers and LALOs at Woolwich Centre and hotel
- Volunteer Centre Greenwich recruited and screened volunteers from the second week for the hotel, including people with language skills
- New Afghan “communities of interest” group (part of Covid response) provided interpreters and volunteers
- Between Council, NHS, Volunteer Centre Greenwich, Christ Church and Greenwich Islamic Centre, at least 350 individuals volunteered [182 RBG, 99 VCG, and around 70 NHS and residents, including Councillors]



# Moving on...

- DHSC aware hotel was closing as a quarantine hotel on 15 September
- Council requested priority to move people on as closure date loomed, persistently flagged this with Home Office
- Majority of people only moved on 13 and 14 September, mostly to bridging hotels in north of England
- Council prioritised resettling two families who had babies during quarantine, unaccompanied minor, and now two further families
- Afghan woman requiring specialist treatment moved to bridging hotel in London so could access Guy's



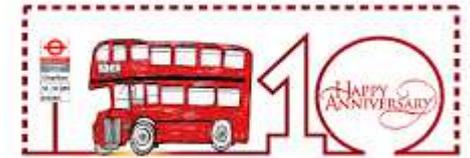
# Our resettlement commitments ...

- Council will resettle its fair share of Afghan refugee families as agreed through London Councils
- 3 families from 16 September, fourth from 23 September, all in newly furnished temporary accommodation found by Housing Inclusion Service
- Subsistence will be provided until benefits commence



# Our resettlement commitments ...

- Two families prioritised as had babies during quarantine, allocated Early Help case worker, linking to ESOL classes and Children's Centres
- Fathers educated and speak English, some have lived in UK, highly skilled, keen to gain employment.
- All families are registered with a GP practice
- With consent, resettled families have been put in touch with each other and are forming their own social support network



## Some issues ...

- Guests kept under quarantine rules even after 10 days quarantine, so hard to access our support provided by Council and offered by refugee and migrant groups
- Mabway eventually mobilised, telephone calls to rooms, but duplicated effort, then Council informed Mabway contract had ended
- A senior Home Office official finally responded to Council on 10 September, exposed lack of communication between Home Office and DHSC
- Little information to guests, inadequate explanations, late notice on moves

## And some more issues ...

- Lack of confirmation from DHSC about what expenditure can be claimed back by Councils
- Inadequate and incorrect information, or lack of information from Government throughout the process
- Failure to mobilise the support promised – what if Council and NHS had not stepped in?
- Honesty earlier from Government would have enabled Council to respond more quickly and more efficiently



# What we gained ...

- So many people volunteered, and valued being able to help – energising, constructive change from MS Teams meetings and the “day job”
- Tremendous response from Council staff donating clothes and essentials
- Rapid, effective and flexible response from Council and partners – not an emergency, but emergency planning infrastructure central to supporting response
- Lives were protected through robust maternity pathways, provision of interpreters and phenomenal Primary Care input



## And what it cost ...

- Council cash expenditure on clothing, toiletries, other essentials for quarantine hotel - **£41,000**
- Meeting the immediate needs of families being resettled - **£11,300**
- Council assessment of officer time to date - **£97,000**



# Learning for the future ...

- Generally local authorities are best placed to respond at local level to national crises
- Council and other public and voluntary sector partners will rally around and do what's needed
- Government has responsibility to provide senior, named points of contact (DHSC did, Home Office didn't)
- Tremendous appetite for volunteering, could staff be supported more e.g. Good Gym "missions", more time off?
- Greenwich has a robust approach to events planning – SAG approach shared as model by DHSC to other areas for MQS
- Emergency planning infrastructure underpinned speed and effectiveness of response